

Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan: The Polemics of Myth making and Influence of Gandhi

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Abstract

The present paper represents the three triumvirs of Indian English novel at the critical juncture of the early twentieth century when Gandhian thoughts and polemics were influential throughout India. The paper seeks to explore how under Gandhian presence—both physical as well as metaphorical, these three novelists attempted to explore the myths and mythical narratives of Indian civilization and culture to manifest the ‘collective unconscious’ of the Indian sensibilities. Furthermore, it also tries to understand the polemics of myth-making in the context of post-colonial politics and writing. The nationalist culture of the early twentieth century and the contribution of these writers are being explored to analyze how their narratives are national allegories.

Keywords- Civilization, Indianness, Tradition, Human Values

The collective unconscious, Indian English Novel, Mahatma Gandhi, Mulk Raj Anand, Myths, Nationalist, Post-colonial, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao The triumvirs of Indian English fiction who put the genre of the Indian English novel in specificity and Indian writing in general on a high pedestal and made the world look at the rise of Indian English with awe and reverence are Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan (Das, 2009). All three of them in the first half of the twentieth century not just worked with and in the English language to Indianize it, but also as the same time, dealing with the Indian traditions as well as the then issues with the objective of

developing India from within making their narratives allegories of the nation as Frederic Jameson postulates that ‘all third world narratives are national allegories.’ While writing these allegories, these three authors took special care to represent the Indian traditional myths as well as modern sensibilities in equilibrium to manifest the then Indian mindset and civilization. This short paper seeks to explore, Mulk Raj Anand Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan’s writings, in general, to understand how they represent the then Indian mythological parameters in a manner that made the readers know and understand the cultural significance of Indian myths and traditions. In doing this, they were all very much influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his beliefs which also are being explored in the process of the paper.

In general terms, modernists are thought to be antithetical to traditions as they seem to think that traditions are what pull people away from the modernist tendencies and arrests their minds to the ways of the past. But to speak of traditions in such a manner as to create a necessary binary between tradition and modernity needs to be deconstructed to understand that one can live a life where both the traditions as well as modernist sensibilities can coexist together. One can be an ardent devotee of science and technology and have faith in the Almighty. Science and God are not antithetical to each other. Similarly, traditions and modernity are not just polar opposites.

Such a dichotomy between tradition and modernity is just a construct that has been made part of the popular canon of thinking without giving many scholarly thoughts into it. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the western-educated men from India were the ones who took the mantle of exploring the western vistas of knowledge and brought to the fore some of the ideas which were prevalent in the western canon because of their English Education. The western-educated youth at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in their zeal to deal with the western notions, tried to do away with everything Indian as they were enamoured by the Western supposed scientific ideas (Agnihotri, 1984). Thus, a hatred for things Indian can be seen in some of the early writers in India, though soon this gave way to a much more critical thought process when the western-educated youth, instead of imitating the western narratives, went back to Indian mythological stories and represented in their writings the things which are Indian in essence—for example, Michael Madhusudan Dutt in his famous *Meghnadbhadr Kavya* reworked on *The Ramayana*, Toru Dutt celebrated the Casuarina tree, etc.

As we come to the twentieth century, we see the rise of Indian novels – both in the vernacular and as well in the English language. In English, as stated the three novelists tried their best to represent Indian myths as they felt that writing within the mythical traditions of the Indian subcontinent will provide their stories not just immediate appeal to the Indian audience, but also will make them respectful of the Indian sensibilities which was very essential for awakening the national ethos. Mahatma Gandhi's presence in the Indian political and cultural scenario created such a mesmerizing effect on the Indian audience, especially the Indian writers, that they could not but neglect his presence in their writings (Rao, 2009).

Mulk Raj Anand while writing *Untouchable*, spent a number of days in Gandhi's ashram to experience the lives of the untouchables in India from close quarters and to be with Gandhi and know his ideology on the same. As he represents the life of Bakha in his novel, as a day from an untouchable's life from very close quarters, he also brings the character of Gandhi in his novel to show how Gandhi's way is also one of the means through which the stigma of untouchability can be done away with. In Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*, though Mahatma Gandhi does not appear as a character, the whole novel is centred on Gandhian ideals and the character Murthy is a Gandhian protagonist who tries to spread the preaching of Gandhi to create national awareness. Even in R. K. Narayan, Gandhian ideals often find true manifestation in many ways.

Thus, it can be seen that Gandhi and his thoughts have a continuous presence in the writings of all these three novelists - Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan. All these novelists took up Gandhian ideals as Gandhi in his ideas and thoughts as well as actions dealt with the Indian mythological traditions in a far greater way than any other national leaders of the early twentieth century. What is very significant about Gandhi is that he experienced the west and its culture from very close quarters as he spent a long time in England studying law and then interacted with the British also in his racial and anti-colonial struggle in South Africa. Along with his experiences with the West, his vast readings of western literature and philosophy also provided him with a perspective on western societies and their culture.

It is not that Gandhi discarded the West, he was deeply influenced by Tolstoy and Thoreau's ideas; but the mechanization of the West due to the industrial revolution deeply saddened his soul and he was against the western mechanization of civilization. Instead, Gandhi found a deep solace and revolutionary spirit in the Vedantic philosophy, in the traditions

of *ahimsa*, in religious tolerance that India has always been proud of, in the Indian mythical traditions and also in the spiritual quest which was a typical feature of Indian populace and society. All these influenced and inspired him so much that Gandhi reworked on these with his individual talent and made his own philosophy which he enumerated not only in his lectures but also in his writings. These writings had a deep impact on the Indian writers and they took up Gandhian philosophy and ideology to such an extent that in their own writings, they focused on representing the Indian myths and mythological characters or even based the characters on the mythological figures (Jha, 1983).

In many ways, these Indian novelists – Anand, Rao and Narayan – in their own ways make the Indian as well as the international readers aware then India has a rich tradition of myths and mythological stories. It is not that anyone had doubts about the richness of the Indian culture, but what was important in the first half of the twentieth century was to bring an awareness of Indian sensibilities to formulate a strong and firm belief in things India and to represent the ethical and spiritual India. There was no better way to do so but by the use of myths. Myths are primordial narratives that bring to the fore the essential ethical values of a civilization. Myths are what Carl Jung, the modern psychologist and philosopher, defines as what is there in the ‘collective unconscious’ (Jung) of all people belonging to a particular culture or community. By exploring the ‘collective unconscious of the Indians in the then times, Anand, Rao and Narayan tried to make the Indians see what their naked eye could not see as the western glass of modernity had blinded them (Dubey, 2010).

These three novelists consciously tried to make the Indian readers become aware that they need to go beyond their westernized self, see and feel that Indianized sensibilities and make themselves aware of their ‘unconscious’ self which is very much Indian, despite all the Indian influences. In other words, Indian civilization in the early twentieth century thought that it was blindly trying to imitate the western culture and civilization. It is a usual aspect of the colonized culture that the colonized is blinded by the apparent glitz and glamour of the colonizer’s culture—by the mechanization, by the supposed industrialization and technological advancements. The colonized start feeling low about his own culture and makes attempts to disown himself from his own land, culture, civilization to cope with and copy the colonized (Narasimhaihan, 1978).

But as it happens with the colonized that despite their best efforts to undo their colonized self and its cultural make-up, they remain engrossed in their own culture without them being aware of the same. They may consciously try to imitate the west, but the west remains a part of themselves, where the other-self keeps on valuing the Indian culture, civilization and myths. It is this ‘contrapuntal existence’ (Said, 1978) of the colonized self that makes the colonized so distinct. It is the hybridity of existence—“double, but not yet one” (Bhabha, 1994) which provides the colonized a special significance.

Said and Bhabha may have theorized about the colonized in the second half of the twentieth century, but the post-colonial temperament and politics are what has started much before. All these three novelists – Rao, Narayan and Anand, as well as Mahatma Gandhi are exponents of post-colonialism as they had already started exploring colonialism and its effects, making resistance to the colonial mechanism, ideology, power dynamics as well as cultural hegemony in their own ways to create awareness amongst people. Instead of theorizing postcolonialism, these writers and Gandhi made a conscious attempt to instil the postcolonial resistance and its essence in the hearts of the people and that is where their politics and political participation in the Indian freedom struggle is much more significant.

In this context, it is to be remembered that for a writer it is the commitment to his people which is most important. Jean-Paul Sartre in his book *What is Literature?* While talking about the commitment of the writer stated that a committed writer has but only one subject and that is ‘freedom’ and his way of writing is such that nobody can turn and say that he was not aware of it. All these three writers- Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan– are also showing their commitment to India by trying to bring to the fore the essence of freedom of mind, spirit, body and soul. And in doing so, they consciously used Indian mythology as it is through the use of mythological figures and narratives that they could appeal to the Indian “unconscious” and connect with them in greater ways.

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